

Communities of Leaders and Learners

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Almost everyone agrees that the command-and-control corporate model will not carry us into the twenty-first century. In a world of increasing interdependence and rapid change, it is no longer possible to figure it out from the top. Nor, as today's CEOs keep discovering, is it possible to *command* people to make the profound systemic changes needed to transform industrial-age institutions for the next business era. Increasingly, successful organizations are building competitive advantage through less controlling and more learning — that is, through continually creating and sharing new knowledge. The implications this change will have for the theory and practice of management are impossible for us to overestimate. But, we can start by rethinking our most basic concepts of leadership and learning.

Leadership first. In the knowledge era, we will finally have to surrender the myth of leaders as isolated heroes commanding their organizations from on high. Top-down directives, even when they are implemented, reinforce an environment of fear, distrust, and internal competitiveness that reduces collaboration and cooperation. They foster compliance instead of commitment, yet only genuine commitment can bring about the courage, imagination, patience, and perseverance necessary in a knowledge-creating organization. For those reasons, leadership in the future will be distributed among diverse individuals and teams who share responsibility for creating the organization's future.

Building a *community* of leaders within an organization requires recognizing and developing

- local line leaders, managers with significant bottom-line responsibility, such as business unit managers, who introduce and implement new ideas;
- executive leaders, top-level managers who mentor local line leaders and become their "thinking partners," who steward cultural change through shifts in their own behavior and that of top-level teams, and who use their authority to invest in new knowledge infrastructures such as learning laboratories; and
- internal networkers, people, often with no formal authority, such as internal consultants or human resources professionals and frontline workers, who move about the organization spreading and fostering commitment to new ideas and practices.

In knowledge-creating organizations, these three types of leaders absolutely rely on one another. None alone can create an environment that ensures continual innovation and diffusion of knowledge.

As for learning, after six years of collaborative experimentation as part of the MIT Organizational Learning Center [OLC], companies such as Ford, Shell Oil, Harley-Davidson, Hewlett-Packard, Chrysler, EDS, FedEx, and Intel are finding that enduring institutional learning arises only from three interrelated activities:

research, the disciplined pursuit of discovery and understanding that leads to generalizable theory and method;

capacity building, the enhancement of people's capabilities and knowledge to achieve results in line with their deepest personal and professional aspirations; and

practice, the stuff that happens in organizations every day — people working together to achieve practical outcomes and building practical know-how in the process.

Today the knowledge-creating process has become deeply fragmented. The three core activities are typically carried out by specialized, disconnected, often antagonistic institutions: universities, consulting firms, and businesses. Too often the results are ivory-tower research that is rarely applied, consulting projects that offer recommendations for solving problems but rarely build people's ability to stop creating the problems in the first place, and nonstop fire fighting as managers carom from crisis to crisis.

The deep systemic problems that afflict our institutions and society are not likely to be remedied until we rediscover what has been lost in this age of specialization: the ability to honor and integrate theory, personal development, and practical results. In fact, the former corporate members of the OLC, along with MIT, have re-formed as the Society for Organizational Learning to do just that.

In a sense, such a change involves returning to an older model of community: traditional societies that gave equal respect to elders for their wisdom; teachers for their ability to help people grow; and warriors, weavers, and growers for their life skills.

Poised at the millennium, we confront two critical challenges: how to address deep problems for which hierarchical leadership alone is insufficient and how to harness the intelligence and spirit of people at all levels of an organization to continually build and share knowledge. Our responses may lead us, ironically, to a future based on more ancient — and more natural — ways of organizing: communities of diverse and effective leaders who empower their organizations to learn with head, heart, and hand.